Meals, Eucharist, and Ecumenism

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One of the typical settings in which Jesus is presented, in all four of the canonical gospels, is at a meal. And, the highpoint of his presence among his followers is portrayed in context of the Passover meal we call 'the Last Supper.' Let us begin with the John's gospel. There the narrative begins with a marriage meal in Cana and ends it with an equally wondrous meal after the resurrection, at daybreak on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, preceded by Jesus' invitation: 'come and have breakfast' (Jn 21:12).[1] Meal scenes account for around a quarter of this gospel.[2] When we turn to the Synoptics we find the same interest. Apart from the final Passover meal, there are meals in houses, meals in the open air, stories focussed on meals such as that of the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:2-32 – and note that the meal-scene of the parable is a response to an objection to the commensality of Jesus) and information about meals (e.g. Lk 14:9). Besides the report of Jesus' manner of blessing the Father and then sharing a loaf and cup with those with him at table (Mk 14:22 and parallels),[3] there were scandal-giving occasions where Jesus ate with sinners and tax-collectors (e.g. Mt 9:10-3), and the post-resurrection meal at Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35). In all four gospels, Jesus is portrayed as present at meals and engaged in this ministry by teaching at meals.[4] This ubiquity of meals compels us

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[1] The question as to whether Jn 21 is an addition to the gospel is irrelevant here because we have no evidence that the gospel ever circulated without this chapter; and, equally, if this was not part of the original performances by a traveling evangelist named John, the material must come from a similar early situation and so furnish additional evidence for the importance of meals within the earliest churches.

[2] On the role of meals in Jn see E. Kobel, *Dining with John: Communal Meals and Identity Formation in the Fourth Gospel and its Historical and Cultural Context* (Leiden 2011).

[3] On the problems within our eucharistic memory of these texts, see T. O'Loughlin, The "Eucharistic Words of Jesus": An Un-noticed Silence in our Earliest Sources,' *Anaphora* 8/1(2014)1-12.

[4] This theme has been explored by many New Testament and early church scholars in the last two decades, the work of D.E. Smith,

to recognise a basic fact about the Christian proclamation: it was originally heard at community meals. It was when the community gathered for a meal that they blessed the Father, 'through the Christ,'[5] and there they heard those travelling performers whose narrating of the significance of Jesus, what they referred to as 'the gospel,' earned for them the title of 'the gospellers.' Shared meals are not only at the centre of human culture, but are at the centre of Christian identity.

This meal dimension of the lives of the early churches has left its mark upon our subsequent history, but the actual notice paid to the phenomenon of meal sharing has been negligible or non-existent. The study of the meals of the early Christians has appeared in the last few decades,[6] and in many churches is still far from being part of the preached memory of the gospels. However, given that reference to those meals, and in particular the Last Supper, is an important element in the debates between churches with regard to their differences about the Eucharist, this is a development that is not merely of relevance to the study of Christian origins (where it is now a serious endeavour[7]) or the origins of the liturgy (where it is equally given attention[8]), but to those who are involved in ecumenics.

Meal as 'context'

From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World (Minneapolis, MN 2003) is an excellent starting point.

[5] See *Didache* 9:2 and 9:4; and cf. T. O'Loughlin, 'The Prayers of the Liturgy' in V. Boland and T. McCarthy eds, *The Word is Flesh and Blood: The Eucharist and Sacred Scripture – Festschrift for Prof. Wilfrid Harrington* (Dublin 2012), 113-22.

[6] The 1967 work by Norman Perrin (*Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*, London) is often taken as one of the first works to engage with Jesus' table behaviour; it certainly takes a vastly different line to that found in earlier work interested in Jesus at table (e.g. J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London 1958)) which concentrate solely on the Last Supper.

[7] For example, P.-B. Smit, 'A Symposiastic Background to James?' *New Testament Studies* 58(2011)105-22.

[8] For example, A.B. McGowan, *Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals* (Oxford 1999).

In stark contrast with the scenes reconstructed through historical investigations of the early churches, many Christians today who formally profess that the Eucharist is 'the centre and summit of the Christian life,' may never have taken part in a shared meal where the very identity of the diners, and the fact of the sharing, is constitutive of their faith in the Christ. For a collective expression of Christian identity most today would turn to some celebration of memory in the form of words with reading, singing and preaching: a Liturgy of the Word. While their celebration of the eucharistic liturgy might minimise both practically and theoretically the meal dimension of their activity. There would be a 'meal form' to their formal liturgical service, but it would not be a meal *qua tale*. It would have elements of a meal – eating and drinking token amounts of bread and wine[9] – but would first of all be imagined as something quite distinct from a meal: a memorial or a act of worship or as 'a sacrifice.' Thus the meal would be at best the context *within* which this other reality exists and from which it was metaphysically really distinct.

This reduction of the meal to being an historical context, a cultural wrapper, an accidental aspect of history, or a material locus, can be found in many forms, but one example can stand for all. Some time ago, Joseph Ratzinger wrote:

> The Eucharist that Christians celebrate cannot adequately be described by the term 'meal.' True the Lord established the new reality of Christian worship within the framework of a Jewish Passover meal but it was precisely this new reality, not the meal as such, that he commanded us to repeat. Very soon the new reality was separated from its ancient context and found its proper and suitable form. This new and all encompassing form of worship could not be derived simply from the meal.[10]

In this perception the meal is merely an historical moment from which the Eucharist has now emerged – and it is this new emerged reality that is to be considered within the Christian vision. However, it should be noted that the disappearance of the meal,

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[9] It is not my concern here that the early account stress 'a loaf' (an actual object) rather than [some] 'bread' (a kind of food stuff) and 'a cup' (related to how one drinks) rather than 'wine' (a genus of potable liquid); here my concern is solely with how the 'elements' of the Eucharist have been *de facto* understood.

[10] *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco, CA, 2000), 78.

and actual meal sharing disappeared from Christian practice probably in the third century,[11] was neither a simple nor an edifying process. The reduction of the sharing to token amounts was probably due to the difficulties of sharing food within a highly stratified society. The diner at one's elbow might be a 'brother' or 'sister' liturgically, but they had also to recall that they were one's slave, client, or social inferior. So the formal sharing took place in one location, while the meal (for those who could afford it and among social equals) took place elsewhere. Similarly, the move from the evening – the context of dinner – to a breakfast with clients reflects the economic values of the Roman empire rather than any vision of the eschatological banquet to which all, irrespective of wealth or status, are called. Indeed, the disappearance of an actual shared meal and its replacement by a token meal is a classic example of how we must not accept, in the fashion of some nineteenth and twentieth-century Catholic theologians, that 'developments' are always positive growths, following providential principles intrinsic to Christian faith, and to be welcomed as bringing clarity and fullness.[12] They may be 'organic' growths but these may simply reflect the social organism whose values are not those of the gospel. We have to always take account that our symbols become commonplace, contract, and are betrayed through the desire 'to get them done' and so are in continual need of reform and regeneration.[13]

For this juxtaposition of views of the meals of the early churches two questions arise. First, the historical insight that meals were so

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[11] C. Leonhard, 'Morning *salutationes* and the Decline of Sympotic Eucharists in the Third Century,' *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 18(2014)420-42.

[12] It should be noted that J.H. Newman wrote in apologetic mode: his task was to defend an actual later case; but the theory of development has often been obverted such that any later situation can be shown as 'an organic development' from a earlier form (could it be otherwise?) and, ipso facto, justified – thus denying the possibility that a situation could organically develop but be a corruption in need of reform.

[13] On the contraction of symbols to token, and hence their need for regeneration lest they betray their origins, see T. O'Loughlin, 'Liturgical Evolution and the Fallacy of the Continuing Consequence,' *Worship* 83(2009)312-23.

central to early Christianity poses a problem of understanding for those Christians – such as Orthodox, Catholics, and Anglicans – who not only have a formalised liturgy but where there is an implicit claim to continuity as a guarantor of the salience of their liturgy. If continuity with the past is important for our beliefs about our worship, then the disruptions with the past, whether they are direct (such as the disappearance of actual eating and drinking at the Eucharist by most lay Christians) or indirect (such as the replacement of the egalitarian nature of the assembly with one reflecting social hierarchy), become situations that can be either rejected as threats or seen as calls for reform. The 'culture wars' that have been part of the ecclesial landscape for the past half century can be seen, in part, as expressions of these two responses to the discovery that our liturgical practice is neither what it has always been, nor as it is everywhere, nor as it has been received by all.[14] The move from a shared, inclusive community meal to token amounts of bread and wine which 'ticked the boxes' for eating and drinking at a common event is just such a case of the past calling for a regeneration in the present.[15]

Second, the fact that we have minimised our memory of the meal dimension of the Eucharist – either by forgetting it or declaring it to be a matter of 'context' – carries with it theological implications for our discussions with one another in the aftermath of the Eucharist being at the focus of our disagreements. Put another way, if the Eucharist is a wholly new reality whose links with its own past – within Judaism – and the human reality of shared meals is but that of its originating *locus*, then only the study by theologians of what is held regarding the Eucharist is significant for theological discussion. But if the Eucharist is seen as intrinsically a meal, an event in human life

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[14] I desire to echo here the Vincentian canon that what the Church believes is that which is *quod semper, quod ubique, et ab omnibus*.

[15] Canon 13 of the Council of Nicaea (325) in its statement that the dying should not be deprived of the reception of the Eucharist as *ephodion* (viaticum) is our incidental witness to a shift in eucharistic understanding from the activity of the Church towards it as the most sacred possession such that people are more sure of their exclusion from participation than their inclusion as members of the Body of the Christ.

which within an incarnational perspective is an encounter with God, then the reality of meals is itself a primary theological *locus*. In studying the meal within human cultures we encounter part of the fundamental revelation that our human meal sharing belongs within the *missio Dei* – and this forms the foundation, not simply the context, for our specifically Christian understanding. Meals are not simply an anthropological background to human ritual / Christian liturgy, but stand in the same relationship to our discipleship as natural law stands to Christian morality. Human meals are part of the dispensation of creation within which we are encountered by the divine love. If we commit ourselves to a position of grace building on nature, then the eucharistic meal has to be seen as building upon this human commensality; the sacramental reality *in Christo* is in continuity with human sacramental reality *in Deo*.

So, on both counts, a study of the Eucharist as a true human meal becomes important for our ecumenical journey. This meal perspective may offer valuable opportunities to overcome past divisions and offer us new ways forward. It is this question I want to explore further, and particularly from a Roman Catholic perspective.

The situation since Vatican II

One of the effects of the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council is that Catholics have become far more comfortable with noting the connection meal-dimension of Eucharist;[16] this has manifested itself in many countries in a far higher participation in eating, and in some places drinking, at the Eucharist;[17] and this

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[16] For example: the two *beraka*-style prayers used at the Preparation of the Gifts ('Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation …'), while the disappearance of Latin has exposed congregations to the meal language that is part of the Eucharistic Prayers.

[17] Anglophone Catholics sometimes imagine that the movement of the twentieth century to promote reception of Holy Communion, as distinct from presence at the Eucharist without receiving, has been universally successful. However, in many parts of the Catholic world it is still common that only a handful of the people present at Mass (perhaps less than 10%) 'go to communion.' While outside a few places, reception *sub utraque specie* is

has paralleled the renewed scholarly interest in the Eucharist's origins in a meal. Indeed it is now so familiar that we are apt, today, to forget just how new a phenomenon this is. However, without recalling that past we may not understand why there is still considerable hesitation about regarding the Eucharist as a meal and a reluctance, in the way we actually celebrate, to see the meal as the basis of our ritual. Catholics, and perhaps other Christians, have an ambiguous attitude at this time towards speaking about the Eucharist as a meal or when they do so to hedge it with so many qualifications as to place a de facto chasm between 'a meal' and 'the Eucharist.'

Until the 1960s meal language was formally resisted: such terms as the 'The Lord's Supper' – favoured for example by John Calvin[18] – were seen as obscuring the reality of 'the Mass as a sacrifice' and the use of meal terms, invariably the word 'supper,' became one of the shibboleths of division. The preferred Catholic language was that of the Mass as 'an unbloody sacrifice.' While the rubrics on occasion referred to the *mensa*, the actual object within a liturgical space was referred to as 'the altar' – and that usage was defended as a significant marker between the churches.[19] Meanwhile, the architecture of churches made thinking of the altar as a table for a meal almost impossible to visualise,[20] when the inspiration was that of a temple, with separation behind railings and an elevated sanctuary. Furthermore, for a millennium it was rare for anyone except the celebrating priest to receive communion at most Masses: few Catholics associated Mass with eating (much less with drinking). It was only at the start of the twentieth century that a movement

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virtually unknown (e.g. Ireland, France, Germany, Italy) in normal practice.

[18] *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4, 24.

[19] See C.E. Pocknee, *The Christian Altar: In History and Today* (London 1963), 33 where he was at pains to point out that it was really an altar rather than a 'holy table.'

[20] Though there was the curious *vestigium* of four pillars or pilasters often placed in front of the solid rectangular slab that was the front of the altar which echoed when it was a table with four legs.

for more frequent Communion began and, even then, the focus was on 'receiving' rather than eating.[21]

The various efforts that were made to promote 'more frequent communion' are now largely forgotten but we can see more clearly where we are, as Catholics, today by recalling that movement and the three major problems that hampered it. First, there was an inheritance in practice that linked 'receiving communion' with having 'gone to confession' (i.e. participating in the Sacrament of Penance). 'Taking communion' became inevitably linked with notions of purity and perfection – quite apart from the excesses of Jansenism. If one had to be in 'a state of grace' as an outcome of the Sacrament of Penance,' then the reception of communion became not only restricted to the pious, but was itself seen as distinct from the necessities of Christian practice: one had 'to hear Mass' but one only had to receive but once a year (and hence one had to go to confession, at least once year).[22] Anyone receiving more than once a year was engaging in a work of super-rogation, and any sense of the inherent links between the liturgy and eating were rendered otiose.

Second, even if one went to confession, one had to maintain that 'state of grace' between confession and Communion. This was commonly interpreted to mean sexual continence,[23] and this led

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[21] There were frequent admonitions that the wafer was not to be chewed but swallowed whole; when this advice began to change in the late 1960s many parochial clergy were quick to point out the use of the *manducate* (in the dominical words as found in the liturgy) but without noticing that they had been preaching the exact opposite of this just a few years previously.

[22] It should be noted that not least of the defects of the Missal of 1570 was that it supposed that no one other than the celebrating priest would be receiving communion. When in that rite there were others 'for communion' an additional rite had to be imported. In practice, this meant that many priests preferred not to delay Mass (for themselves waiting for their breakfast, and for the majority of the others present who had no intention of receiving) on account of the few who did want to receive and therefore accommodated those few by giving them communion *before* Mass began.

[23] I mentioned this recently at a seminar and while most reactions were incredulous of this as an anti-incarnational juxtaposition of

to the cultural phenomenon that saw 'getting Communion' as being an activity of the young, the old and the single.[24] 'Communion' was 'an extra' and the mark of an enthusiast: it was not part of 'just being ordinary.' Indeed, people were fearful: if you were just 'ordinary' it was better to stay away. In a curious way this fearfulness of 'communion' can be traced back to the notion of bringing about one's own condemnation based on a mis-reading of 1 Cor 11:28-30. While few Catholics could have cited that text they would have agreed with the sentiment: wiser, simpler and better to stay away than commit the greater sin of unworthily receiving.[25]

The third problem was a function of the stringent fasting laws that made having Communion very difficult after the early morning. If one did not *have* to go to communion, and it was so difficult, then why take on un-necessary problems for oneself? The generally wise advice of 'taking the line of least resistance' argued that one stayed away unless one *had* to! In most places an actual distribution of communion only took place at 'the early Mass' (well before normal breakfast time) and this was for those who did not see Sunday as a day to rest and have a 'lie on' before the luxury of a leisurely breakfast.[26] At the 'later Masses' there was no pause within the rite for communion even for the altar server.

'flesh' and 'spirit' or defensive ('this was never *official* teaching'), and Orthodox participant notes that it would still be taken as normative within his church.

[24] It is meaningless to state that this approach was never formal teaching. For understanding attitudes it is more important to find out what was actually believed 'on the ground' and this was the theology that was embedded in practice.

[25] On this fear within nineteenth-century Anglican objections to the more frequent celebration of Holy Communion suggested by the Oxford Movement, see F. Knight, *The Nineteenth-century Church and English Society* (Cambridge 1995), 53-7.

[26] It should be noted that in most places it is still the norm that the Eucharist is celebrated in the morning, this is itself a *vestigium* of the decay in practice from the *cena* to *salutatio* (see Leonhard 2014). A fuller understanding of the meal-dimension would appreciate that we tend to gather with friends after the day's work not before it!

The practical result was that the Eucharist and the receiving of communion – now separate realities in a common perception that was supported theologically by the distinction of the 'Eucharist as sacrifice' and 'the Eucharist as sacrament'[27] – became objects within the Christian dispensation, and as such capable of abstract analysis, rather than activities which we engaged in by Christians as part of their discipleship, and as such matters of experience and reflection.

This may seem to belong to a pre-Vatican II past, but many approaches to the issue of intercommunication are still framed within that older vision. Trying to adapt that older vision – as many Catholics in the ecumenical movement in the past century have done – is probably destined to failure. If the Eucharist is a reality that is wholly to be understood within the context of Christian revelation, then the official pronouncements that see sacramental sharing as consequent upon ecclesial union are probably correct and represent a limit-case of the paradigm: one can go no further, and one can but cyclically repeat the arguments.

Meal as paradigm

If one takes as the starting point the practice of Jesus – arguably more accessible than his words[28] – then the shared meal in which the Father is blessed is not simply a context for some later development but an event within a pattern of discipleship. But is sharing a meal an event with significance for discipleship now, today, or it is simply a matter of devoted imitation (by analogy, for example, with wearing sandals 'because he wore them')? That meal sharing is an intrinsic part of discipleship seems to me to be beyond dispute because the fundamental activity of eating together is not an arbitrary ritual code nor an activity specific to

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[27] Note that the Council of Trent arranged its teaching using this set of categories: Session 13 (1551) on 'the Sacrament of the Eucharist'; and Session 22 (1562) on 'the Sacrifice of the Mass.'

[28] This approach has been adopted in many studies of the early churches which assume that actions are repeated with greater fidelity than word or explanations of those actions. See É. Nodet, and J. Taylor, *The Origins of Christianity: An Exploration* (Collegeville, MN. 1998); and J.P. Meier, 'The Eucharist at the Last Supper: did it happen?' *Theology Digest* 42(1995)335-51.

one culture but something that is common to humanity. We not only must work together to obtain our foodstuffs, but we must collaborate to turn these into food, then (directly or indirectly) work together in cooking it, and then act as social beings in eating together. Meal sharing is as distinctively human an activity and characteristic as we can find.

This anthropological starting point is often noted by historians and biblical scholars when they turn their attention the food and meals in their studies,[29] but surely it also has significance for theologians also? The case can be made that since shared meals belong in our world, they are eminently suitable to be moments of encounter with the Father – a sacrament – through him who has entered our world: the event that is the mystery of the incarnation. Now that which is real among us, the meal, is also the threshold of that which is more than us. An event that effects and celebrates human community can be that which celebrates our Christian community and can call to mind both the meals of our past – those meals remembered in the gospels – and our future: our vision of the eschaton as a banquet?

Moreover, in focussing on the Eucharist as an event which exists in our human gathering we move decisively away from the notion of the Eucharist as an 'it' - the ultimate commodity – to that of the Eucharist as an activity of the baptized, in and through and with the Christ, in praising the Father. Eucharist is a fundamental activity of Christians not one of their precious possessions. 'Eucharist' is derived from a verb rather than being primarily a noun. From this viewpoint, the activity of the baptized is always that which is incomplete, that which is the best we can do now, that which we are seeking to do more fittingly, and so for all Christians it can be located on their pilgrim path.[30] We must all, whatever our church or theology, seek to move towards a more adequate eucharistic activity. As such, there is no place for exclusivist arguments from one church regarding another: all must note their inadequacy in praising God in spirit and truth (cf. Jn 4:23-4), rather than clinging to a particular theology which

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[29] For a summary, see T. O'Loughlin, *The Eucharist: Origins and Contemporary Understandings* (London 2015), 65-94.
[30] This is a theme that has been expressed by Pope Francis in 2015: see *One in Christ* 50,1 (2016) where several papers explore the notion.

becomes determinative of what 'Eucharist' means. The adequate theology is coincident with the adequate sacrifice of praise at the eschatological meal.

A meal strategy within ecumenical debate also brings with it another dimension in our overcoming of inherited division. Meals have their own dynamics, what we might refer to as their own grammar, which becomes a theological logic with regard to sharing in one another's celebrations. I cannot welcome you to my table and then refuse you food, nor can I take a place at your table and then refuse what you provide! In such a situation the reality of the gathering becomes an instance of the church, and as fellow pilgrims, and brothers and sisters in the Lord, we must share all we have so that all are sustained on their journey.[31]

The recovery of the meal-dimension of the ministry of Jesus, as remembered in the meal-sharing of the earliest churches, may not only represent a paradigm shift in the study of the Eucharist but in ecumenical relations – and practice.

[31] It is this approach that has prompted me to write: *Eating Together, Becoming One: Taking Up Pope Francis's Call to Theologians* (Collegeville, MN 2019).